

# WHEN PRIVILEGE RULED IN THE ARMY

(Written for "The Listener" by ROBERT H. NEIL,  
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"Gallop from front to rear as often as possible"

THOSE who say that in the Army merit has a poor chance against privilege are to-day not soldiers. They say such things partly because they do not know the facts and partly because they have always said them. But they would have been right 150 years ago. So great a soldier as Wellington, for example, got his first chance out of his pocket. If he had not been able to buy his way into the Army, and a little distance farther, he would not have been a retired conqueror at forty-six. Nor would Captain Francis Grose, the antiquary—and friend of Robert Burns—have dared to write his satirical *Advice to the British and Irish Armies* twenty years after Wellington was born.

The point, however, is that those who got most fun out of reading Grose to-day are soldiers themselves. A few extracts will show why.

Here is an extract from the advice to General Officers Commanding-in-Chief:

"Ignorance of your profession is best concealed by solemnity and silence, which pass for profound knowledge upon the generality of mankind. A proper attention to these, together with extreme severity, particularly in trifles, will soon procure you the character of a good officer.

"It is your duty to be attentive to the public good, but not without some regard to your own, in your dispensation of favours. You must take care never to advance an officer above one step at a time, however brilliant his merit, unless he be your relation, for you must consider that your ignorance in the higher branches of your profession can only be covered by the strictest attention to punctilio and the minutiae of the Service. As you probably did not rise to your present distinguished rank by your own merit, it cannot reasonably be expected that you should promote others on that score. Above all, be careful never to promote an intelligent officer; a brave, chuckle-headed fellow will do full as well to execute your orders. An officer that has an iota of knowledge above the common run you must consider as your personal enemy, for you may be sure he laughs at you and your manoeuvres."

The next chapter contains this to General Officers on the Staff:

"If any appointments . . . happen to fall within your disposal, be sure to give them all in your own regiment and to persons who do not want them, and are incapable of doing the business. The less they are qualified to act, the greater the obligation to you, and the more evident the demonstration of your power. It will show that your favour is sufficient to enable a man to hold and to discharge any office, however deficient his knowledge of the duties.

"Nothing shows a general's attention more than requiring a number of returns, particularly such as it is difficult to make with any degree of accuracy. Let your brigade-major, therefore, make out a variety of forms, the more red lines the better; as to the information they convey, that is immaterial; no one ever reads them, the chief use of them being to keep the adjutants and sergeants in employment, and to make a perquisite to your valet-de-chambre, who can sell them at the snuff shop or to the grocer."

## Colonels, Adjutants, And Others

Only the last sentence betrays the eighteenth century; and throughout the little book of a hundred and forty pages there are the same well-balanced shafts of irony which go silently and fatally to the mark. Here are a few more:

**Lieut.-Colonels:** "When the regiment is on the march, gallop from front to rear as often as possible, especially if the road is dusty. Never pass through the intervals, but charge through the centre of each platoon. . . . The cry of 'open to the right and left'—incline to the right—marks your importance; and it is diverting enough to dust a parcel of fellows already half-choked, and to see a poor devil of a soldier, loaded like a jackass, endeavouring to get out of the way. In your absence the same liberty may be taken by the adjutant."

**Adjutants:** "An adjutant is a wit ex-officio, and finds many standing jokes annexed to his appointment. . . . Reading and writing are very necessary accomplishments for an adjutant. . . . If you cannot spell, you should keep Entick's dictionary in your pocket; but it will be of little use if you know not the meaning of the words; so it will be best for you to get the sergeant-major or some other intelligent N.C.O., if there be such in the corps, to write your orders, letters, etc."

## In the Quartermaster's Store

**Quartermasters:** "You need not mind whether the provisions issued to the soldiers be good or bad. If it were always good, they would get too much attached to eating to be good soldiers—and, as a proof that this gormandizing is not military, you will not find in a gallant army of 50,000 men a single fat man, unless it be a quartermaster or a quartermaster-sergeant. If the soldiers

complain of the bread, taste it, and say, better men have ate much worse. Talk of the 'bompernickle' or black rye bread of the Germans, and swear you have seen the time when you would have jumped at it."

**Chaplains:** "Remember that it is your duty, in common with the adjutant, to report all the scandal of the regiment to the commanding officer, whose favour you should omit no means to court and procure. This will set you above the malicious jokes of the young subalterns."

**Young Officers:** "If ever you have been abroad, though but to deliver drafts at Emden or Williamstadt, give yourself the airs of an experienced veteran: and, in particular, find fault with all parades, field days, or reviews, as of no consequence on real service. In regard to all these, say you hate to be 'playing at soldiers.'"

## "A Hearty Contempt"

**Sergeants:** "You are not only to entertain a hearty contempt for young officers, but you must also take care to communicate it to the soldiers. The more you appear to despise your superiors, the greater respect, you know, your inferiors will profess for you. You will easily contrive to humbug the young subalterns, and make them do just what you please in the company; but remember that you are to assume the merit of their good-natured actions to yourself, and to impute all the others to their own impulse."



"Not a single fat man, unless it be a quartermaster"

**Drummers:** "Never sweep the guard-room till the guard is just going to be relieved; the unsettled dust will prove to the relieving officer that you have not omitted that part of your duty."

**Private Soldiers:** "If the duty runs hard, you may easily sham sick, by swallowing a quid of tobacco. Knock your elbow against the wall of your tent-pole and it will accelerate the circulation to the quickness of a fever. Quicklime and soap will give you a pair of sore legs that would deceive the surgeon-general himself; and the rheumatism is an admirable pretence not easily discovered."

It is obvious from these extracts that Captain Francis Grose kept his eyes open when he was in the Surrey Militia, and that antiquarian studies may be judiciously interspersed with bouts of amiable foolery.

## LISTENINGS

Perpetrated and illustrated by  
KEN ALEXANDER

AMERICAN submarines have sunk some Jap. transports off the coast of Japan. This is hitting the Jap where he lives. "Home, swat home!" The Japs are finding that the American eagle has a wide wingspread. It is no mere coincidence that "U.S.A." and "Aus." contain the same letters.



What is the Russian advance doing to the world? It is making Hitler wonder how far he can back-pedal without falling off the saddle. It is convincing Goebbels that there are times when, if

honesty is not the best policy, it is the only policy left. The trouble is that he has never kept up the premiums. It is causing the German people to realise that it's going to be hard to disown the mad dog of Europe when the dog-catcher comes round to collect damages. It is teaching them that "Booty is only sin deep." It is giving them a taste of the bitter blood mixture they recommended to others as a cure for the ills of Europe.

It is giving Frenchmen hope of again being French without tears. It is making Mussolini believe that his dear old friend may become too weak to keep up the friendship.

It is causing quislings to feel queasy round the collar. It is producing fear of the old-fashioned rope trick. If Hitler goes down they may go up—swing high, swing low!

It is producing the suspicion in Britain that the Invasion Test may not come off on account of Germany's inability to raise a team. It is causing Japan to wonder if an Axis can be on the square. It is encouraging all democracies to unite for the threatened peace.